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1-1-1984

Salvador Dali; 1904; Madonna of Port Lligat; 1949

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Published version. "Salvador Dali; 1904; Madonna of Port Lligat; 1949" in *Treasures of the Vatican: New Orleans Vatican Pavilion 1984*. New Orleans: The Pavilion, 1984: 49-51. © 1984 New Orleans Vatican Pavilion.

GALLERY FOUR

"To those who receive the Spirit, the water of the Spirit turns into a spring welling up unto eternal life" (John 4:14).



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38) SALVADOR DALÍ; 1904; **MADONNA OF PORT LLIGAT**; 1949; oil on canvas; height 19½", width 15¼". Marquette University Museum of Art, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ira Haupt.

Salvador Dalí painted *The Madonna of Port Lligat* (1949) in his beloved Port Lligat, a tiny fishing village on the Spanish coast between Barcelona and the French border, shortly after he returned from the United States, where he had lived during World War II. A preliminary sketch, called a "Study for the Ma-

donna of Port Lligat" (1949), is in a private collection. A larger painting, with notable differences in the rendition of the subject and expansion of the symbolism, is presently in the collection of Lady Beaverbrook of New Brunswick, Canada.

Dalí traveled to Rome with this smaller *Madonna of Port Lligat* during 1949, when he met with Pope Pius XII. The Pope showed great interest in Dalí's surrealist interpretation of the Madonna and Child theme. In the spirit of a Holy Year, the Pope accepted the sincerity of Dalí's pilgrimage and blessed the work. Acquired

by Mr. and Mrs. Ira Haupt of New York, it remained in their home until 1959, when they presented it to Marquette University.

The 1949 *Madonna of Port Lligat* marks several important transitions in Dali's career: a gradual break with the Surrealists with whom he had been identified for many years, a public identification with Catholicism symbolized by his visit to Pius XII, and the beginning of a series of important religious works that he was to produce over the next several years. In these works, and especially here, Dali combines a tradition of classical Western painting with Surrealism.

Dali was influenced by classical painters, notably by Piero della Francesca and Raphael. Dali himself refers to Piero's *The Virgin and Child with Saints and Angels* (Pinacoteca Di Brera, Milan) as the inspiration for his *Madonna of Port Lligat*. Similarities exist between Dali's *Madonna of Port Lligat* (1949) and the Brera Madonna. Both Madonnas are seated on thrones with their hands clasped together and forming an arch above the Christ Child. Both are prominently centered under an arch beneath which a white egg hangs by a string from a large sea shell. Even a casual survey of Raphael's Madonnas will show that Dali's *Madonna of Port Lligat* (1949) belongs to the same tradition. Raphael's *Madonna Di Foligno*, now located in the Vatican Museum Pinacoteca, also shows the Madonna and Child suspended in space above the earth. A comparison of the paintings affirms Dali's substantial debt to Raphael.

Within an artistic framework representing the conjunction of classical and surrealist styles, Dali manifests a religious mysticism which can be traced to the Spaniards, St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila.

Dali's use of the concept of "dematerialization" illustrates the impact the atomic age had made upon him. He explains his meaning: the changes in matter resulting from an atomic explosion are parallel to his spiritual transformation of the Madonna. Because of her unique role, her physical body is "dematerialized." The open space cut through her torso, for instance, becomes a "mystical and virginal tabernacle" where the Christ Child resides. Her mask-like face and head are suspended above dismembered hands and arms. The Christ Child "floats" inside the tabernacle space.

Dali's allusions to the atomic age, combined with his use of surrealist imagery, show his intention to produce a modern painting, not a mere working of a familiar theme according to an earlier style. The modernity of the *Port Lligat Madonna* is also suggested in his use of modern optics. A remarkable sense of spatial depth is achieved here by introducing three-dimensional stereoscopic qualities. The colors of striking clarity suggest the medium of modern color photography, which may have influenced Dali's approach to the painting.

Although the principal symbolism centers on the Madonna and Child, Dali's use of that theme is more complex than at first appears. On one level, the *Port Lligat Madonna* is the mystical symbol of Christianity, as she is in the paintings of Piero della Francesca and of Raphael. With quiet dignity, she exemplifies the

spiritual values associated historically with the Madonna. As the first religious work that Dali created, the *Port Lligat Madonna* also represents Dali's own synthesis of these values into an image suitable for the modern world.

The *Port Lligat Madonna* is also intended as homage to his wife, Gala, who was the model for his painting. "Gala, my wife, whom I had the miraculous good fortune to choose, is a unique person whose image is comparable to the serene perfections of the Renaissance. In all the genre paintings, therefore, there is but one and only presence of that visible woman, Gala, my wife." For Dali, Gala was both Helen of Troy and the Madonna, the sensuous and spiritual ideals in one, the guiding force in his life.

The *Madonna of Port Lligat* is thus to be doubly understood, first as the Madonna of the mystical spirit and then as Dali's tribute to his beloved wife. Dali's "humanized" Gala-Madonna is actually more prominently emphasized, however, in the 1950 version of the *Port Lligat Madonna*, whose strongly realistic figures are closer to modern photo-realism than to Renaissance models.

Although in a visually subordinate role, the Christ Child has a central place in the meaning of this painting. Dali's model for the Child is Juan Figueras, a fisherman's son from Cadaques. The symbolism here, with the egg, the inverted shell and the fish, appears to rely upon conventional meanings. Christ's domination over the earth is indicated by his placement in the tabernacle that has replaced the Madonna's torso, and by the world and cross that surround him.

The egg and the sea shell trace back to Piero della Francesca's Brera Altar in Milan, as noted earlier, except that Dali inverts the sea shell. In a Renaissance painting, an egg often symbolized the resurrection, sometimes (as in the work of Piero della Francesca) the four elements of the earth. Dali discusses the importance of the egg at length in his book, *Fifty Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship*. He compares it to a world suspended from heaven. In this painting, the egg represents the unity of the Catholic Church in the world. Its placement over the Madonna signals her prominence in that world sphere. Or, as we have said, the egg may additionally represent the central roles of Gala, and of painting, in the artist's personal world.

Sea shells, in particular scallop shells, may represent pilgrimage or baptism. The fish, according to the conventions of Christian tradition, represents Christ. The lemons are associated with fidelity in love.

The sea urchin, especially prominent in this painting, has a unique meaning for Dali. He invites one to view his painting through the microscopic world of a sea urchin's skeleton fitted with a crystal lens. He uses this device to measure the perfection of his paintings. He also compares the "architectural" structure of the skeleton of a sea urchin to the finest of man-made architectural structures, and likens the sea urchin's role in the life of a painter to the role of a human skeleton in the life of a saint. The saint who periodically knows

ecstasies and is drawn by "other-worldly" concerns, is reminded of his earthly condition by a human skull. The painter, whose ecstasies are primarily related to the material world, requires the skeleton of the sea urchin to remind him of the celestial regions beyond the sensuality of his oils.

Especially important to a complete reading of this painting is the role played by architecture. Dali follows the Renaissance painters, particularly Piero della Francesca, in his use of the architecture surrounding the Madonna and Child. From the Middle Ages on, architecture has been used to express essential thoughts. In the later Renaissance, the principal figures in a painting are frequently enclosed in an architectural structure

(Piero's Brera Altar). The architecture is intended to express a synthesis of humankind and the world, and is the point of view through which the painter perceives the people and nature itself. In this instance, Dali shows the human figures suspended in space, fragmented, and dismembered; what he is saying, then, is that they are mystically transcendent in respect to the world.

The *Madonna of Port Lligat* painting joins together the prophet's words, "Behold, a Virgin shall conceive a Son!" and the pendulum of atomic force that keeps "clocking over time and space."

C.L.C.